

What happened to Election 2004?

By Danny Schechter & Timothy Kerr
mediachannel.org | May 19, 2004

The political jokes on Letterman and Saturday Night Live have grown stale. The Republicans repeat their Kerry flip-flop mantra like a listless Greek chorus, while all-too-familiar pundits trade theories on whether the Senator will choose McCain/Edwards/Graham as a running mate. Bush's approval ratings fall, but he stands even if not ahead of Kerry in the mind-numbing barrage of presidential preference polls.

We have entered the seventh-inning stretch of a hotly contested election race. Why, then, are many already heading for the exits? We're told this election is a watershed event, the most divisive and important political choice of our generation, a battle between America's two halves, a time of grave national introspection. . . Still, the nation seems to have become bored with it all.

Network attention to the domestic political issues that Americans say matter most has hit an election year low, according to recently released MediaChannel data. Missing in May's dreary mix of election coverage are the policy positions that voters say they rely upon to set the candidates apart. Instead we're being fed an occasional diet of polls and partisan attacks on character.

And it's not just the media that has lost the trail. With less than six months left before the election, many in the American electorate seem to have gone into a holding pattern as well.

Carroll Doherty, editor of the Pew Research Center, says that as many as 22 percent of registered voters are still undecided or could change their vote from one candidate to the other. They're waiting, perhaps, for the next political shoe to drop.

It was refreshing on Saturday to hear Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. suggest policies for the Kerry camp this election year. During a speech at the Nation Institute-New Democracy Conference, Jackson called for constitutional amendments that guarantee universal access to health care, quality education and environmental protection.

Few if any from mainstream media attended Jackson's speech. And, not surprising, there were no news reports on his election-year proposals. What political coverage does exist —

What happened to Election 2004? / 2

for those absent members of our fourth estate — focuses more on trading sound bites and images of established candidates than on covering what actual voters want to hear from their candidates.

Network monitoring by MediaChannel.org and Media Tenor reveals that NBC, ABC and CBS have devoted less than 5 percent of their nightly news coverage to the candidates' views on the three domestic issues that Americans say matter most: the economy, health care and education. Moreover, coverage by the networks of candidate John Kerry has nearly halved since the first week of March. By the first week of May, NBC, CBS and ABC devoted only 6.4 percent of their coverage to the Democratic frontrunner; nearly half of the 12.7 percent of network coverage Kerry received in early March.

While coverage of Bush remains constant through the year — about 13 percent of network news is devoted to statements by or about the president — the emphasis has shifted from his re-election campaign and policy platform to his handling of the war in Iraq with the related prisoner abuse scandal topping the news.

According to election and media researchers, we're witnessing a mid-year trend away from campaign interest altogether.

"We saw a peek of interest in the campaign during the primaries, especially around the March 'Super Tuesday' vote," Carroll Doherty says. But since then the percentage of voters who said that they "thought a lot about the elections" has fallen from 65 percent to 59 percent, according to Pew. "We're in a little bit of a lull right now," Doherty says, "and Iraq coverage is sucking all of the oxygen out of everything else."

The voter distraction may be OK for now. What with the torture news, the beheading news, the Rumsfeld news, the are-we-losing-the-war? news and the NBA playoffs, it seems understandable that the presidential political campaign is out of sight, and out of mind.

The public might become bored by the constantly televised litany of charge and counter-charge, warring ads, horserace updates and non-stop smears. Overexposure of any issue on TV tends to deaden audiences rather than engage them.

Overkill leads to tune-out and then to low turnout, some say. The fear though, if the media doesn't return to message, is that their current campaign nap may do little to engage millions of already disenfranchised voters in the democratic process.

Public interest in politics is often tied to how interesting the reporting is. In the past, political journalism has often de-politicized the electorate with an insider focus on the horse race between the candidates and onslaught of constantly shifting polling data.

After every election, journalism reviews do post mortems that conclude that the coverage was flawed, irresponsible and often inaccurate.

Is it any different in this election cycle?

What happened to Election 2004? / 3

If you follow Mediachannel.org's Media Savvy newsletter or some of the reportage on Campaigndesk.org, the Columbia Journalism Review's definitive monitoring site, you will find many of the same problems surfacing. Whether it was the constant repetition of the "Dean Scream" footage on the cable nets, or showing all the staged photo ops or the constant references to John Kerry's "flip-flops" by GOP attack dogs, the effect is the same – to obscure the issues and oversimplify the process.

How should the campaign be covered? And how can the public press the press to do a better job?

The current issue of Nieman Reports, the journal of Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism, features a round-up of proposals by campaign reporters as collected by the Committee of Concerned Journalists.

It is significant that some reporters see the problems, and recognize that our media can undermine democracy as easily as strengthen it.

In the issue, Phil Troustine former political editor of The San Jose Mercury News writes that too many reporters are cynics, not just skeptics. This leads to the sense that they are hard-bitten realists when they are simplistic and often biased.

Former Washington Post journalist Paul Taylor argues that policies and platforms should be viewed as character issues. "Suddenly policy and issues come to life and become people stories and take on an authenticity that they lack in the abstract."

Bill Kovach, a veteran editor says much of campaigning has disappeared into a "private sphere" with candidates increasingly making appeals via direct mail, e-mail, CD-ROMs, etc. He urges reporters to troll the Internet and talk to voters about how they are or are not influenced.

Kovach also urges reporters to get beyond the liberal-conservative paradigm where two sides define every issue. "Look at the root causes of the issues being discussed," he urges.

Other suggestions have to do with making more sense out of polling data, to explain what they say rather than just throwing out numbers. Don't just cover what the candidates are saying urges Jack Germond, but find out what people really care about. "Cover voters, not polls," adds David Jones of The New York Times.

Paul Friedman, who used to run ABC's World News Tonight, calls on reporters to stay behind after a campaign leaves town and try to measure its impact.

Tom Rosensteil of The Project for Excellence in Journalism says look at campaign narratives and themes. Are they true? Or distortions? There is more political coverage today than ever – bloggers, websites, and video journalists – but is it any better? Are we really learning about issues or the interests that shape political choices? Are we hearing from the disaffected voters and about ways to re-engage them with the political process?

What happened to Election 2004? / 4

The best way to judge political journalism is to take part in the process, to be there and get involved. Then you can see how what you experienced is covered. It is then that you get to understand in your gut as well as your mind when American political journalism misses the mark.

“News Dissector” Danny Schechter is the executive editor of MediaChannel.org. He writes a daily blog for MediaChannel.org. Timothy Karr is the executive director of MediaChannel.org.